

Proper 3, Year A
May 25, 2008

Good Shepherd, Berkeley

Isaiah 49: 8-16a
Ps 131
I Cor, 4: 1-5
Mt. 6: 24-34

Today is the Second Sunday after Pentecost, the beginning of the unofficially entitled "Long Green Season" because of the color of our vestments, green. Green signifies the growth of the Christian Body from its birth at Pentecost and through formation by the stories and teachings of Jesus for nearly half the cycle of the Church Year.

There are, of course, occasional breaks for festivals, and if we were an Anglo-Catholic or Roman Catholic parish we might well be celebrating one today – the Feast of Corpus Christi. That feast was established in the 12th Century and while originally, and I would guess in its Anglo-Catholic manifestations it is a festival celebrating the gift that is the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. As these things go it became corrupted into something a little too concrete, shall we say, in which the host itself was worshipped instead of being seen as a sign pointing to the mystery of Christ's abiding presence among us still through the Christian Community's celebration of the Mass.

When I was a new rector at Church of the Ascension in Vallejo in the early 90's there was an elderly man in the congregation who was an uber-Catholic settling for the Episcopal Church only because he'd been divorced.

Needless to say, he had great difficulty with the Vestry's choice of a woman as the new rector. The test case came around the Feast of Corpus Christi when he wanted me to do Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament with procession. The parish actually had a monstrance (explain) and matching gold *lame* cope and humeral veil (explain) because the previous incumbent was very into dress-up and *did* celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi. I first told my parishioner that Benediction was probably something done more in warmer climes and he did remind me that we lived in California. Then I told him one just couldn't ask these things of a recovering Roman Catholic and I refused to do it. So I'm glad Good Shepherd doesn't celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, though I do commend to you its intent.

This morning I would like to focus on what is going on in the Gospel and try to open up some very familiar sayings with the question, how well do we understand what Jesus was up to in this teaching.

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

That's the King James translation of a couple verses from today's Gospel. I quote you that translation to better aid your imagination, or perhaps your memory. Think of a needle-pointed sampler hanging on your granny's wall, the image in stained glass, or perhaps a 19th century spirit

drawing from a Shaker community. It's sweet, isn't it? And comforting? But it's not the gospel, I'm sorry, just the poetic bits taken out of context.

Like several verses from today's gospel: "no one can serve two masters;" "you cannot serve God and mammon" (King James, again...for the sake of the needlepoint, you see); "can you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own." These are all sayings from Matthew's long teaching to his disciples, *The Sermon on the Mount*, the whole of which sets the behavioral agenda for the New Age. But when they are used as comfort food for the soul then we are in danger of missing the point.

Gas is four dollars a gallon, the economy is in recession, people are loosing their homes in the mortgage industry debacle, the Anglican Communion is slowly unraveling, and immigration police stalk the sidewalks outside our schools.... What's the matter with a little comfort, you ask? Nothing's wrong with it. Our psalm offers an exquisite image of comfort – the soul calmed and quieted like a child at its mother's breast. Comfort, however, is not the point in Jesus' teaching. Radical trust, however, is.

We live in anxious time and there are truly fearful things going on in the world around us. Our repertoire of response might, on the one hand take refuge in a safe and sentimental interpretation of today's gospel. On the other hand the injunction to not worry about food, shelter and clothing or be anxious about the morrow might very well elicit a cynical response. But, as I

have said, such interpretations miss the point. The purpose of the teaching is to learn how to be partners with God in carrying out God's mission. Such a partnership requires radical trust.

Jesus offers three different ways of getting at this in today's gospel. The first is a warning about trying to serve two masters. In other words, clarity of purpose and single-minded commitment are expected of the followers of Jesus – *expected*, not suggested.

Second, Jesus challenges the universal human anxiety over material goods. This isn't a prescription for carelessness or irresponsibility but it *is* a warning about anxious attachment. A healthy balance toward these concerns frees the follower of Jesus to engage the work of his mission. So, holding them, yes, but holding them loosely, not slavishly and in a way that doesn't permit our material concerns to over-ride the mission, letting them become the master (to recapitulate the warning about serving two masters.) That would create a false dichotomy – between God and the gifts of God's creation which are given to us from God's abundant and ever-mindful generosity. Matthew says, God knows we need these things and God will provide them. The challenge for us is in trusting the providence of the Creator. I wonder if this doesn't get at the difficulty we really have with this idea. If we let go of our anxiety it might actually feel like letting go of control, and we can't have that, can we? If we achieve some degree of detachment from material things, that, too, suggests surrendering control.

It's a frightening thought, and not something we do very well in an American take-charge culture – hence the *radical* in radical trust.

The third perspective offered in today's lesson is a call to live in the present rather than borrowing on tomorrow's troubles, for, as anyone past kindergarten can tell you, today's troubles are sufficient enough for one day. An inability to be present to the persons and events right in front of us means that the gifts God has to give us in *this* day are lost to us. The opening verses of Night Prayer in the New Zealand Prayerbook say, "It is but lost labour that we haste to rise up early, and so late take rest, and eat the bread of anxiety. For those beloved of God are given gifts even while they sleep." Or in the Maori translation of the Lord's prayer, "with the bread we need for today, feed us." There is an immediacy to these phrases that prays for the grace of presence in the present moment.

Those who think about organizations as organic and dynamic systems would argue that if you're going to transform a system you have to be rooted in another system. I think *that's* what Jesus is offering in his teaching and ministry, it's what is meant by "being in the world but not of it." Jesus is giving us the values of another, an alternative system, for being in the world. And he's inviting us into this alternate worldview in order to participate in his redemption and restoration of the world in which we live. If God is in charge and our life is in God, then there really *isn't* anything to worry about.

The culture, however, would argue otherwise. Yesterday I watched a YouTube video called "Shift Happens." Go to YouTube and look it up. It's a video created by the Colorado Department of Education in 2006, making the point that our education system needs to "prepare students for jobs and technologies that don't yet exist...in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet." With repeating screens asking, "Did you know" a variety of statistics charting exponential change continue for screen after screen. For example: "In 10 years it is predicted that the largest English speaking country in the world will be...China." Or "more than 70% of four year olds have used a computer." Or, "if *My Space* were a country it would be the 8th largest in the world." Or, "In 2006 the amount of technical information doubled every two years. By 2010 it will double every 72 hours."

I watched this video after I wrote the words, "If God is in charge and our life is in God, then there really *isn't* anything to worry about." And I thought, "What are you talking about?" Do I really live my life as if I believed God is in charge?

What does it mean to be rooted in another system, what does that rooted life look like? Our first lesson from the prophet Isaiah offers a perspective on the rooted life. It is a covenanted life. It is a life danced with the God of restoration in which land is returned, prisoners are freed, the wilderness is transformed into fertile pasture, there is ample food and water and rough highways are made smooth. In other words, anxiety will be

calmed, material needs will be provisioned, and today's troubles will be attended. God's promises to Israel are honored and God is faithful to God's promises. Furthermore, the restoration will include more than the exiles from Babylon, the returning ones will be from the north and the west and as far south as southern Egypt. It is a universal restoration.

Those who live the rooted life gather in covenanted community to celebrate the sacraments of God's life and presence among us, to tell stories of Jesus, the Lover of God who became one of us for our redemption and restoration. And together we try to understand how his story illumines our stories, how his life and mission become our life and mission.

Finally, the rooted life is a life of relationship. Last week in preaching about the doctrine of the Trinity Jay talked about the dynamic relationship of love that gives us a window into God's mystery, a mystery fundamentally characterized by relationality. We are invited into that relationship because God has become one of us in Jesus. Through him we are connected to one another and grounded, rooted in the mystery of God that is Love. From that perspective I invite you to consider the lilies of the field and to not be worried about tomorrow.